



MELDRENA CHAPIN, PhD
ARCHITECTURAL GERONTOLOGIST

Pedagogical Philosophy

In teaching, I bring an interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary approach into the classroom and the environmental design studio by encouraging students to undertake different initiatives during the design process:

- a) analyzing and synthesizing information through the application of design research methods;
- b) understanding the client and/or building users and their unique needs, desires, and understandings of the built environment and the meaning of place;
- c) exploring how different cultures, organizations and individuals approach the built environment;
- d) investigating seminal and emerging theories through readings, and exposure to professionals both within architecture and in other fields;
- e) reflecting real-world scenarios through collaborations not only with peer designers, but with other disciplines, building users and clients; and
- f) developing effective written and spoken communication to compliment expressive graphic representations of creative inquiry, research results and design ideas.

Students learn the critical importance of design psychology, culture, design theory, human factors, functional detail, and programming. They do this while undertaking design thinking and creative visualization efforts in order to express functional and aesthetic solutions. They focus on incorporating theories and approaches from numerous disciplines in my classes. Students are more engaged in design when they understand the impact of environmental psychology, anthropology, sociology and neuroscience on the creative process of design and human interaction with the built environment.

Design thinking, environmental awareness, informed design and collaboration with client and user are crucial for creating successful places. Students need to be aware of theory, data collection methods, various forms of analysis, and participatory design. Teaching experience demonstrates that this teaching approach works for design students and non-design students alike. Design students benefit from understanding gerontological and sociological theories, and, conversely, gerontologists benefit from learning the significance of the built environment in everyday life, various architectural theories, methods for understanding graphic presentation techniques, and design methodologies.

The classroom is a place for curiosity and exploration, where individuals should be exposed to a variety of ideas and perspectives that can inform the creative process. Knowing the fundamentals or technologies is critical, and should serve as the foundation upon which creative inquiry in its limitless possibilities can be explored. Design is not a single-discipline practice and therefore should be informed and influenced by a wide array of theories and concepts. I encourage students to look beyond the frame of interior design to find inspiration and information to inform their design process and creative work. Students are taught to use information from other disciplines in a beneficial way by approaching design through systemic thinking.

Research is also a critical component of the design studios that I teach. Students are expected to apply evidence-based design at an appropriate level. Early undergraduate students are asked to base design decisions on the research conducted by others. MFA thesis students are expected to understand the research within the context of their project and to generate new knowledge through their own data collection and analysis, justifying all design decisions based upon the information gleaned from research.

I enjoy lecturing and often have been complimented on my ability to explain very complex ideas in an easily digestible manner. While introduction to new perspectives and concepts is critical, the classroom is not just a place for absorption and dialogue, it is also a setting for doing. In-class exercises and assignments focus on student engagement and active learning. The goal is to generate curious designers eager to solve problems and improve the world through creating beneficial environments using a variety of means. Recently, my classes have explored this goal through an emphasis on social justice and biophilic design.

Social Justice, or Social Economic Environmental Design (SEED), aims to:

provide design services to those who would normally not be able to afford to do so, in an effort to solve critical real-world problems. This emphasis on real-world design connects students to actual clients - organizations and individuals; explores sustainability, durability and ease of construction; and expresses the importance of budget and financial concerns upon design.

Biophilic design, is design focused on "love of life" and aims to increase our natural human connection to living things. Biophilic design emphasizes the application of a subset of the 72 attributes developed by Kellert, Heerwagen and Mador. A cross between the contemporary movement of sustainability, the historical Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements, and the Organic Architecture era of the 1950s-1960s, biophilic design aims to connect man and nature through generating a unique built environment. Related to biophilic design is the discipline of biomimicry, the adaptation of naturally derived solutions to solving real world problems in the built environment. Students in my biophilic design classes are energetic and inspired at an unprecedented level.

The creation and communication of knowledge and ideas is critical in the classroom. This isn't just in the direction of professor to student, but also student to student, and student to the greater world beyond. Lively, engaged dialogue within the classroom, as well as feedback to students, plays a particularly important role in my classes. Directed study is combined with individual exploration and self-expression. Knowledge gained is critical and the communication of knowledge is also vital. Students in my classes focus upon disseminating ideas through:

- a) traditional methods (written papers, visual presentations, modeling).
- b) performance (professionally presenting ideas to professional and peers through oral and graphic means)
- c) non-traditional methods to convey ideas to others (blogging, podcasting, video creation, art journals, college, photography, art books, etc.)

This combined focus on information dissemination through various methods is aimed at allowing students to develop and express their own unique individual expression and design personae. It also prepares students to perform in a professional world with a growing emphasis on social networking and global business.

Overall, I aim to develop life-long learners, design thinkers, problem-solvers and solution-makers who think systemically, creatively and innovatively. These individuals learn to share information with others and become teachers themselves, providing new insights to clients, colleagues and peers. Ultimately, my teaching aims at developing designers who are passionate about the ability for the design of the built environment to make a positive difference.